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A Duty Too Heavy to Bear: Hebrew in the Berlin Haskalah, 1783–1819: Between Classic, Modern, and Romantic

YAACOV SHAVIT

The Enlightenment gave the Jews who hitherto lacked a language not one language but two: German and Hebrew

I. M. Jost

The Hebrew readership of the day . . . , unlike the generation of the Haskalah, is not looking for Hebrew to serve as a “primer” from which to proceed toward another world. They are reading Hebrew because they *are* Hebrew and feel in their soul an inner bond with the national tongue and its literature.

Ahad Ha'am

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The period of the Haskalah (“Jewish Enlightenment”) in Germany is regarded as the start of the “revival of Hebrew” as a literary, i.e., written, tongue. In Germany proper, this revival ended by petering out as early as the end of the eighteenth century, “bequeathing” the “revival of Hebrew” to an Eastern European “Enlightenment.” At the same time, the German Haskalah is regarded as opening the way to the integration of Jews into German culture.

The Berlin Haskalah did not intend to “revive” Hebrew as a sole and exclusive language, as *the* national written and spoken medium. Its practical intention from the outset was to create and propagate a “new Hebrew language” to function alongside other languages. This language was cast in a defined role within the Jewish polyglossic system in Germany (and Eastern Europe). As much as they gave their full weight to the ideology and praxis of the “revival of Hebrew,” so too did the Maskilim (proponents of Haskalah) insist with equal faith and fervor upon the need for study and knowledge of “the language and literature of the people among whom we dwell,”¹ for it was evident to them that without the foreign language there could

be no emancipation and no “reform” of Jewish life. Thus, from the outset, they subjected the Jew who lacked mastery of Hebrew and the “vernacular” (notably German) to a dual burden, with the aim of creating a new situation of diglossia,² with the new foreign tongue in the main role. Alongside it, the equally new Hebrew language was allotted new, clearly-defined goals.

If this were not enough, the new Hebrew language was assigned several social and cultural functions: the “modern” Jew, and not just the Maskil, was thus asked at the dawn of the new age to acquire, urgently and simultaneously, a mastery of two new languages with differing functions. Moreover, in this polyglossic system Hebrew was accorded a variety of simultaneous value concepts: “classicizing,” “Romantic,” and “modern.” And so Maskilim drew up a string of far-reaching demands that were incapable of fulfilment; with the multiple demands of their linguistic-cultural *tendenz* went an exceedingly high level of expectations, designed for the most part to lend legitimation and encouragement to their demands—in the cultural context in which they were uttered. When these expectations failed to find fulfilment, the resulting disillusionment and desolation was due in no small measure to the high expectations fostered by Haskalah rhetoric.

Notwithstanding, the Berlin-Haskalah was a significant, even a critical, turning point in the history of Hebrew and Hebrew culture. This turning point was somewhat paradoxical, for it involved a variety of options, which may be defined as follows: the Berlin Haskalah created the new ideology of Hebrew as a modern language of culture and communication, and gave an impressive display of Hebrew’s range of possibilities and capabilities in almost every domain of the written word. To be sure, before this time Hebrew had served the day-to-day life of the community, but in an “integrated” function, whereas now it was being accorded a role and status associated with an ideological mission and was being used to convey things that were radically new. At the same time, the declining mass and status of Hebrew in Germany even before the end of the eighteenth century created a situation in which, despite the retention of Hebrew study in various frameworks and its continuing fragmented use as a “modern” written medium, it had here to fall back on the role of being little more than a sacred tongue, a functionally restricted language of prayer (and as such, sometimes merely in conjunction with German).

This decline in the status of Hebrew, following its “revival” and its attendant expectations, prompted considerable wonderment as to the “true” intent of the Berlin Maskilim.³ In later generations, particularly from the vista of the Hebrew national movement, the circle of Maskilim was depicted as the last generation of Hebrew aficionados in Germany;⁴ *après eux*, the masses who betrayed and forsook the Hebrew tongue, going so far as to disgrace it in public. Such people were portrayed by the journal *Hamaggid* in the mid-1850s as having violated the language and then buried her, declaring that “the Hebrew tongue is as alien to us as Latin, Greek or Arabic,” in flagrant disregard of the fact that Hebrew was not only the historic-national language but also the common unifying medium of the entire Diaspora, a living language, not an “archaeological tongue” like Egyptian or Akkadian.⁵ So the Berlin Haskalah was adjudged not only to have launched a first, revolutionary stage in the history of modern Hebrew but also to have done so with

insincere motives, and even to have promoted an emancipatory ideology whose encouragement of acculturation and whose conception of the foreign language as sole “vehicle of culture,” nay as the national language of the Jew, led inexorably from “day one” to the abandonment of Hebrew as just one more ex-language. A further criticism was later appended (in the years that saw the moulding of the Hebrew nationalist ethos), to the effect that a majority of Maskilim had been anti-nationalist, or else unwitting agents of a deadly ambivalence in the Jewish mind and psyche—through seeking to impregnate it with a bilingualism whose result was a dualism, “a national catastrophe striking both at the faculty of thought and at the creative force.”⁶ The blame for the abandonment of Hebrew was laid not only upon *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (The science of Judaism) and the Reform Movement but also upon “virtually every rabbi and preacher in Germany,” even among whom, as Peretz Smolenskin wrote with some exaggeration, “there cannot be ten percent who can comprehend Hebrew. . . .”⁷

As early as the late eighteenth century, Yitzhak Euchel, a prime mover of the Berlin Haskalah, was able to utter a lament over the “death” of Hebrew in Germany, over the vanished Hebrew students and the desertion of the Maskilim who “have despised the tongue of their fathers and cast it behind them”; and indeed, he continued in philosophical and pessimistic vein, “times change, and people and opinions with them”;⁸ and in this vein he was not alone. The hopes and future of Hebrew thus lay in Eastern Europe. There are Jews there, wrote I. M. Jost in 1839, who read and write Hebrew, while “in Germany the knowledge of Hebrew is almost a thing of the past.”⁹ This was the dominant mood, although periodicals, anthologies, and textbooks in Hebrew continued to appear through the second decade of the nineteenth century and later still.

This gloomy picture of a rise and an immediate decline was an exaggeration, insofar as any assessment of the knowledge of Hebrew must measure the number of readers, writers, and speakers at a given time in relationship to some earlier date, while also asking what level of Hebrew and which Hebrew. Haskalah activity created the impression of a sudden leap in the number of Hebrew readers, an exaggerated impression due to the very nature of the revolutionary phenomenon. For the present discussion, I shall limit myself to an attempt to elucidate the declared ideological goals of the “Hebrew revival” in the context of the period—the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth—as well as the reasons for the inability of this ideology to achieve fulfilment.

I intend to locate the “inner cause” in the fundamental multifunctionality assigned to Hebrew in Haskalah ideology (and to which I have already alluded), whereas the “objective cause” is to be found in the nature of the circle of Maskilim as well as in its addressees and in the broad historical milieu in which they operated. To my mind, the significance of the ideology and the practical “Hebrew revivalist” activity within the Berlin Haskalah is not only that it was a historical turning point but also that it embodied Hebrew’s three roles, which in fact would only come together some one hundred fifty years after the appearance of the periodical *Ha-Me’assef* (*Der Sammler*), the Hebrew journal of the German Haskalah (1784–97, 1809–11), i.e., within a national “Hebraic” society in Eretz-Israel.¹⁰

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Hebrew, of course, was not a “dead language” in the framework of traditional society but rather continued to exist in a range of day-to-day textual activities, and was “integrated” as a living tongue in the various layers of linguistic activity in Jewish society, as both a written and a spoken medium. There are various testimonies to the low level of Hebrew knowledge among rabbis and cantors. These are primarily by way of impression, historiographical material intended not so much to paint a full and faithful picture of the status of Hebrew and the knowledge of it in traditional society as to point to the fact that rabbis, as well as Maskilim, were aware of its straitened circumstances and were calling for it to be cultivated. But the fundamental difference between traditionalist circles and Maskilim was that the latter accorded Hebrew entirely different functions and significance than the former.¹¹ The fact that the periodical *Ha-Me'assef* could not reach more than some three hundred subscribers (and of course one must also take account of “objective” and ideological causes) and that it gradually expired between 1790 and 1797 indicates that Hebrew as a modern language was being read by the tiniest circle of readers,¹² but says nothing about the potential number of readers for Hebrew as a whole. This number may be contrasted, for example, with the seven hundred fifty purchasing the first edition of the *Bi'ur* (the German translation by Mendelssohn and others of the Five Books of Moses, with the attendant Hebrew commentary, the *Bi'ur*), those reading *Shulamit* (which appeared in 1806) in German, and the number of those requesting the Friedlander-Euchel German prayer-book, published in 1786 and being sold even before coming out in a print-run of about one thousand.¹³ While there are no major divergences here between Hebrew and German readers, they led Katz to conclude that German had made rapid strides in Jewish public life in Germany in the short period of less than a single generation,¹⁴ in complete contrast to the progress of Hebrew.¹⁵

This growth itself would appear to testify not so much to the achievements of Haskalah ideology as to a deepening process of acculturation and assimilation among German Jewry. Sociocultural processes were considerably stronger than ideology. What began in fact as early as the close of the eighteenth century in the small circle of the high bourgeoisie (thus *Ha-Me'assef* of 1786 writes of “Jewish girls who all know how to speak perfectly in Gentile languages and cannot speak Yiddish”) spread among wider circles. Katz even holds that the choice of Hebrew as the language of the German Haskalah was more pragmatic than ideological: the Maskilim did not, for the most part, know German, but they did know Hebrew. This knowledge of Hebrew was in all likelihood the fruit of traditional study and self-instruction. Euchel tells of his first encounter with a group of Maskilim in Koenigsberg, just after his arrival from Lithuania: “They knew Hebrew beautifully.” At the same time, he represents the members of the circle from which he himself came as benighted individuals: “The Hebrew language which You chose for your Torah is in rather poor shape.”¹⁶ The fact that their intended readership did not yet read German, while Yiddish was regarded by the Maskilim as a despicable patchwork language,¹⁷ was another factor compelling them to use Hebrew. But once they had mastered German, they no longer had a need for Hebrew within their

own close circles, and it was merely fashioned as a medium of communication with Maskilim further East, one component of a shared consciousness.

Pragmatic reasons naturally carried great weight. It should, however, not be forgotten that *Ha-Me'assef* began appearing in 1783, before the French Revolution, when the prospects for emancipation were still nonexistent. The processes of acculturation and apostasization were not motivated by a conscious ideology, while the Maskilim were developing just such a collective consciousness and ideology. Hebrew for them was more than just the medium of communication among themselves and with their readership during that brief interlude—a single generation—in which German became an acquired language; Hebrew was the language that created a common consciousness and anchored it in a linguistic conception that was more than a “technical” means of communication, at the same time expressing the sense of mission that the Maskilim harbored toward traditional society. Since they aimed at two levels of change in Jewish society—change from within and change in relations with the surrounding society (and vice versa)—they were obliged to support the creation of a bilingual (Hebrew-German) rather than monolingual Jewish public. As for the “simple folk,” the young Jews meant to undergo a process of “productivization,” it was enough, according to Wessely, that they learn the local vernacular necessary for the acquisition of skills and for restricted social contact, and there was no need to study Hebrew as a “language of culture.” The function of Hebrew had thus been diminished. Paradoxically, it was the Orthodox that adopted it as a secondary “everyday language.”

In Wessely's words, “just as Hebrew has its domain, so German has its domain, the former for sacred matters, faith and Torah, the latter for worldly matters in business and human affairs” and for what was considered “neutral knowledge” (science, philosophy etc.). The linguistic situation was designed to reflect the ideal cultural situation as seen by a “conservative” religiously observant Maskil: an absolute division between the Jewish “inner life” and the Gentile “outer life,” between the Torah and the “external disciplines,” embracing various fields of knowledge. Indeed, one might say that the belief that such a division was possible was reflected in the assumption that each social and cultural sphere within the Jewish society is able to set its own separate language,¹⁸ in other words to draw a linguistic distinction between “sacred” and “profane.” The Berlin Haskalah, as is well-known, did not follow Wessely's line, and used Hebrew for “external disciplines” too, an accurate reflection of its cultural-intellectual world which found expression in the belief that one could imbibe “alien” ideas and arrive at an integration of “external disciplines,” science and metaphysics included, with the Torah and the Jewish belief system. It was thus the vanguard of “secularization,” for Hebrew, hitherto the sacred tongue, served as a vehicle for familiarization with literature and for literary exegesis, undermining the system of beliefs and the traditional historical outlook. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that the German Haskalah was not “secular” and that within it Hebrew was widely used as a medium for literature with an out-and-out religious message.

The Maskilim themselves were forever making high-flown declarations about the character of the “linguistic revival.” Their position on the language and its nature reveals a parallel between conceptions of language in medieval Jewish phi-

losophy and eighteenth-century philosophy of language.¹⁹ Upon the foundations of their great social weakness, the Maskilim thus constructed a series of broad arguments: Hebrew is the most ancient of tongues and must be “raised from the dung-heaps of disgrace.”²⁰ It is the language in which the Scriptures and prayers were composed, and so only by understanding it can one reach an understanding of the Bible; Hebrew is a language of many facets, host to a sublime literature and capable of expressing the whole range of human feelings, but also philosophy and science, etc.²¹ These declarations in praise of Hebrew have already been set out and analyzed in the literature and we need not rehearse them here.²² Without doubt, another reason that Maskilim opted for Hebrew was its dual function in their struggle within traditional Jewish society: on the one hand, it expressed and embodied the “radical” core of the Haskalah, for the stress on Hebrew in the Jewish Enlightenment, as in the Renaissance and Reformation in the Christian World, signified a return to the ancient source and an unshackling from the authority of the official (rabbinic) canonical exegesis.²³ The return to Hebrew and to the Bible also created in practice and in appearance a shared cultural platform for Maskilim and Protestant society. Since Hebrew enjoyed no small prestige in Protestant eyes, its “revival” by the Maskilim was liable to give them prestige among the surrounding intelligentsia. The return to the biblical tongue, and with it the highlighting of its literary dimension, thus became one of the major signs of the intellectual reorientation of the Berlin Haskalah. Linguistically, this ideology placed an added burden upon Hebrew by insisting on restricting it to a single historical phase of the written language. Putting it another way, not only poetry was to be couched in biblical language but science too—which would prove to be impossible from the outset.

The eighteenth century assigned a central value to human language, and to national languages in particular; a process was underway that may be termed “the discovery of language”—meaning the various languages outside the European language family—and a speculative debate raged over the principle of where language originates and the way in which language mirrors cultural and literary circumstances; a classification was also made of the characteristics of the various languages and language families. This great interest in language led the Maskilim too to focus on language and is what gave it the standing it henceforth possessed in the new Jewish historical consciousness, as they turned it into a sign of belonging and continuity and an expression of a cultural essence—and in fact into the source of its cultural manifestations and spiritual content.

Only in the second half of the eighteenth century, be it noted, did the emergence of High German as a “cultural vehicle” reach its decisive phase. This process aimed at the formation of the literary norm of the German national language and the creation of an authentic general German language (*Gemeindeutsch*) and linguistic unity.²⁴ German was now asked to replace both Latin and French and expected to be capable of “conveying new ideas”: “to try to make the German language say things in a different way, in a new way, even sometimes to make it say new things.”²⁵

In revamping the language, the aim was to replace Latin as the vehicle of “high” scholarly culture, and sure enough German was transformed into the language of the Enlightenment, with all its sociomoral values, and the language of science. The

Napoleonic Wars strengthened the desire for liberation from the influence of the French language, quickening German’s transformation into the vehicle of national culture—the basis for turning the Germans into a *Kulturnation*, a nation with a shared national-cultural political consciousness which enhanced the status of its language. Such is the concise, action-packed time span in which the Berlin Haskalah operated.

All this was also being done in a culture in which philosophical debates were held between “rationalists” and “mystics” concerning the origin of natural language and its nature, a debate in which the history and character of Hebrew occupied a place of honor. The Hebrew language was considered a *lingua humana*,²⁶ and for mystics such as J. G. Hamann (1730–88) it was the most sublime and profound of all (“Das Heil kommt von den Juden”);²⁷ while for others Greek held the absolute advantage. But Hamann did not consider a language’s clarity to be the absolute criterion for style, whereas the Maskilim aspired, as we said, to just such a stylistic and linguistic clarity. They did not intend for Hebrew to convey a metaphysical conception but rather a response to Nature, a thrilling to the wholeness and complexity and harmony thereof; above all it had to be a language of wit: a language of the parable, the moralistic-didactic message, of knowledge and science.

The contemporary interest in the qualities and characteristics of Greek vis-à-vis biblical Hebrew found expression in such seminal compositions as those of Robert Lowth (1787)²⁸ and Thomas Blackwell (1736),²⁹ and it is to such sources that one may apparently trace the pronounced tendency by the Maskilim to roll off the list of Hebrew’s qualities and characteristics, particularly *qua* language of literature and poetry: a language that can express humanity’s position vis-à-vis the world and the religious and aesthetic impression the world invokes in it,³⁰ equal, if not superior, to Greek—a classical tongue like Greek, a “classic” source-language of civilization.

What the poetry of Homer was to European culture, the Bible was to the Jewish Maskilim, in particular the poetic layers which under pre-Romantic and then Romantic influence were perceived first as an expression of the classical and later as an expression of the sublime.³¹ The state of the language, to them as to the medieval philosophers, now represented a mirror of the state of the nation, and as far as the Maskilim were concerned, that meant the cultural and social situation in the Diaspora as a closed, petrified society (they could not, of course, espouse Maimonides’ view that life in the land of Israel is the sole condition for a “pure” language),³² which must be “reformed” as part of the European society. Language, wrote Thomas Blackwell, “is the conveyance of our Thoughts” and the Greek language at the time of Homer “was brought to express all the best and bravest of the human Feelings and retained a sufficient Quantity of its *original, amazing, metaphoric* Tincture.”³³ Of especial influence, of course, were Herder’s ideas that language is a mirror of understanding (“ein Spiegel des Verstandes”), of the individual group, and the mirror of the state of a civilization. In his words, “the genius of language is thus the genius of the literature of a nation. . . .”³⁴ The return to the classical was therefore a “corrective” return, a return to the pure, ideal state of things. There was thus a direct and fundamental nexus between the ideology of a consummate Jewish society and that of the revival of the “pure” classical Hebrew, for language was seen

as influencing thought and, by extension, civic behavior.³⁵ An “eclectic” language, such as Yiddish, is therefore like a mirror of an imperfect ossified society, incapable either of perfection from within or of integration into the civic society around it.

Thus to a very great extent German and Hebrew were designed to replace Yiddish, just as in the East the local vernacular together with Hebrew was fully to usurp it. Even if we cannot establish a direct inspiration, we have here a parallel to the outlook prevalent in the selfsame place and around the same time: Behind the move to “purify” Hebrew lay not only a rejection of Yiddish (*Ivri-Taytsh*, the Yiddish translation of Scripture) and the world it represented but also, simultaneously, that same national-cultural trend that was fuelling the activity of language expansion by Germans. They too, like the Maskilim, had to demonstrate that the national tongue was in a position to express “the new activities and results and disciplines that were springing up every day.”³⁶ The criticism of Talmudic language, it should be remembered, did not reflect the attitude of Maskilim to the Talmud as a whole, for they turned to the Talmud for legitimation to study “foreign disciplines,” in particular for a go-ahead to learn the local vernacular.³⁷ The legitimation for this might be found in the Talmud. But the Maskilim rejected the Talmud’s practice of adopting words and concepts from a foreign tongue. In their articles and books, the Maskilim expended huge efforts on “Hebraizing” the concepts and terms and names, but for the most part they set the foreign source word alongside its Hebrew translation.

To this end it was necessary to translate the ideology of a “pure language”—reflecting an “ideal,” primal as far as possible, state of affairs—into outright rationalistic practice, i.e., into an organized establishment of “artificial” norms. By a linguistic norm we mean the definition of a rational principle introduced into the language by means of conscious efforts on the part of the educated and by artificial conscious standardization.

The majority of Maskilim, admittedly, were not particularly intent on demonstrating the metaphorical richness of Hebrew, but they could not accept its portrayal as a language bereft of poetic qualities and qualifications and as a language of simple structures (as Robert Lowth put it, “its form is simple above every other . . . nor capable of much variety”).³⁸ They meant to prove that it could express the whole spectrum of human feelings and could portray “Nature.”

Indeed, within a short space of time, intensively and simultaneously, Hebrew had to demonstrate capability in prose and science (“a language of reason”) and in poetry (“a language of passions”). As a medium for a new “secular” literature, Hebrew was burdened with two herculean tasks, as a classical tongue engendering a classicist poetics and, at the same time, as a modern language creating a scientific literature in Hebrew.

3

There were thus two aspects to the “classical” dimension in the linguistic-literary activity of the Maskilim: (a) an attitude to Hebrew as a “classical” tongue, the language of classical civilization reflecting the golden age of “national culture,” a knowledge of which was deemed equivalent to a knowledge of Greek (or Latin)

among the European intelligentsia; (b) an attempt to create a “classical” Hebrew by “purging” it of postbiblical accretions. However, the Maskilim, as already observed, saw Hebrew literacy as more than just a means of understanding a classical Hebrew civilization from a distant past and the deeper and correct meaning of the Bible, and as more than just a classical layer upon which to mount a modern German-language culture. Hebrew literacy also had an active value in the creation of something new. For these purposes, biblical Hebrew was on a par with the medieval German now being revamped for modern times. Here, then, we find the second motif in the linguistic philosophy of the Berlin Haskalah and of the Jewish Enlightenment as a whole. Hebrew was regarded as a tool of *modernization* (and even acculturation). Putting it another way, the “modern” Jew’s acquaintance with world culture, and with modern culture in particular, was to be effected in part by means of Hebrew.

“Modernization via Hebrew”—and certainly not through Yiddish which symbolized the despicable, the eclectic, the nonauthentic and a traditional conservative society to boot—meant “modernization via translation,” for this was not a case of “original” scientific creation but of an intensive, ongoing attempt at transfer and adaptation, to enable the new Hebrew reader to find the knowledge he or she needed about the “world around them” and its culture, through Hebrew. To this end the Haskalah had to maintain a constant watch for what was happening around it and had to have classificational and selectional criteria (what was worth translating and adapting?) as well as ways of ingesting the selected material into the new Jewish cultural ambience. Equally, it had to espouse new literary genres or to alter the content (occasionally even the form) of traditional genres (an outstanding example would be the parable), and the lexicon had to be expanded, so that it might be possible to import the words and concepts of modern culture. It was not just Hebrew’s *poetic* capability that had to be put on show—it was widely held to be inherently limited—but also its capacity to talk the “*language of science*” and the abstract language of philosophy. And in the background, let us not forget, was a ubiquitous dogma which went from strength to strength as the nineteenth century wore on, even being adopted by various Jewish spokesmen,³⁹ namely that Hebrew lacks the wherewithal to express abstract philosophical concepts. As literary Hebrew was not intended to be a classical language alone, the Maskilim from the first *Ha-Me’assef* onwards invested considerable energy toward “modernizing” it.

The Maskilim, it goes without saying, did not fancy that enlightened Jews, i.e., they themselves, would be able to make do with whatever was translated or adapted for them. They therefore defined themselves as “enlightened men” with a knowledge of both Hebrew and other languages, and attached great importance to learning German.⁴⁰ On the other hand, or so their attitude seemed to be, they believed that the general Jewish public at large, particularly in the East, would be satisfied with a “modernization via Hebrew.” And this indeed is what happened in the second half of the nineteenth century, when many among the broad band of Jews open to the influence of modern culture received this culture via Hebrew.⁴¹ As Ahad Ha’am showed in his article “*Riv Ha-Leshonot*” (The Language Conflict), in Haskalah times Hebrew was “the beginning of knowledge.”⁴² In any event, it is scarcely surprising that as German extended its domination among “modern” Jews in Ger-

many, Hebrew was unable to meet their quest for knowledge and cultural integration, and when the gates of German culture were thrown open to them linguistically, all hope was lost that Hebrew might function as the language of modern culture; it was no longer necessary or useful, to Reformers and Orthodox alike.

Nor was there the motivation in Germany to fight the transformation of the Jewish vernacular into a literary medium or to mount a linguistic and cultural Hebrew opposition, as was indeed the case in later years with the Nationalist Maskilim in Eastern Europe—for Yiddish was pushed aside by German. The key factor in the waning of Hebrew in Germany as the nineteenth century began was the shrinking readership. However, one must not forget that many continued studying Hebrew as a second or secondary language and set themselves the goal of reading Hebrew at some level or other,⁴³ nor that texts of sundry kinds went on appearing in Hebrew until the 1830s.⁴⁴ Thus it was not a total ignorance of Hebrew that drove it to the margins of German Jewish culture, nor even the fact that it had from the start been allotted a minor place in the diglossic system, but above all the attempt to transform it into the language of modern culture within a society undergoing mounting acculturation from the turn of the century. This society now lived amidst a culture which ascribed prestigious weight to its own language and literature and which, by its successes and pulling power, had come to symbolize modern culture at its very best. To ignore its influence was an impossibility, and there was scant desire to do so. *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and the Reform Movement were not alone in regarding German as the language of culture and the national tongue; so too did Orthodoxy. S. R. Hirsch wrote of the German language:

Die Sprache unseres Denkens and Dichtens, die Sprache unserer Liebe and Anhänglichkeit, die Sprache, mit der wir mit jedem Nerv unseres Seins verwachsen sind, bleibt für uns deutsche Juden unsere Muttersprache, unsere schöne deutsche Sprache.⁴⁵

German also served to transmit outright “Jewish” values. And what had been in the cards from the start of the Berlin Haskalah, namely the move to modernization and acculturation via German, and even the move to translate Hebrew religious literature into German, drew further strength from a chain of sociocultural circumstances which carried all ideological resistance before them.

4

The Haskalah also signalled a third avenue, the conception of Hebrew as a national language, i.e., a language that not only unifies all sections of the nation but also expresses the “inner form” of the individual Jewish spirit, the essence of their *Volksgeist*, and their manner of interpreting the world, translating it and giving it order, form, and content. In this way, the Haskalah paved the way to the conception of Hebrew held by the National Movement in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It is of course conceivable that even without the precedent or breakthrough of the Haskalah such a process could have happened, as a result of internal features of Eastern European Jewish society and the influence of nineteenth-century

Romantic nationalism. But the Berlin Haskalah not only engendered ideological assumptions but even showed that Hebrew has the potential of a language that is classical, modern, and national at one and the same time.

It was the “national” rhetoric of the Haskalah, responsible for a multitude of expectations and subsequently for their much criticized nonfulfilment, that created the new platform for projecting language as a central element of individual national consciousness. The German *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment) had already preempted the Romantic movement with this idea of language as expressing the special unique individuality of the national group, inter alia as a rejection of the universalistic rationalism of the “Western” Enlightenment. Language is the expression and embodiment of the *Volksgeist*, and the national tongue, the mother tongue, was seen as the absolute and authentic substantiation of the individualism of the group: “Man thinks only through his mother language. Every man has a mother; a mother tongue is enough for him,” wrote Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, the prophet of German nationalism, in his popular book *Das deutsche Volkstum* (1810).⁴⁶ Those among the Berlin Haskalah who are also termed “nationalists” were of course not nationalists in the conventional sense. They did not subscribe to a return of the Jewish people to its land or to territorial nationalism, nor to the possibility of a full and exclusive Hebrew national culture in the Diaspora. Nationalism such as this was more than just beyond their horizons—it contradicted their goals. Thus the national dimension of the language, in their view, lay in being the key both to understanding the ancient national literature, now considered the authentic “national” *chef d’oeuvre*, and to connecting with this literary expression of the “national spirit” and culture by the direct medium of its language—as well as adding to it. In Haskalah doctrine, language now attained new status as a central element in a Jew’s identity and in his consciousness of historical continuity.

This explains the “mystic,” indeed “organistic,” relationship of Maskilim to Hebrew as bearer of an inner national-cultural value. It is not surprising that they were giving expression to this outlook on the nature of language as early as the 1780s; as already indicated, ideas in this vein had been voiced within the *Aufklärung* even before the Romantic hegemony. Johann David Michaelis, for example, in his prize-winning treatise of 1759, had observed that “languages are an accumulation of the wisdom and genius of nations.”⁴⁷ Other Germans turned to the German literature of the Middle Ages to discover the “natural,” “pure” German. For the Maskil, of course, there was no medieval literature or “popular, organic Hebrew”; for him, the Bible was the alternative literature.

Summing up, the Berlin Haskalah operated against a backdrop of a German cultural environment: from it, they learned to admire the classical languages and learned to see language as mirroring the circumstances of a culture, as being the platform for cultural unity and for the creation of an original national culture; from German, they learned about the concerted effort to create a new normative language while evicting dialects (and casting Yiddish as a colloquial) and about equipping such a language to function on all levels of modern culture. This was no “vision of national revival,” as has often been claimed,⁴⁸ but rather a rhetoric shielding the recognition that the modern Jew would be diglossic and that one must therefore transform Hebrew into his second language and assign it other roles. But the

second-language roles that were assigned in the West were too much for it to bear. The real circumstances, sociocultural and political processes of erosion, led to Hebrew being allotted from the outset a secondary, restricted position on the multilingual German-Jewish scene—restricted but multifunctional.

The achievement of the Berlin Haskalah was not only to prove that Hebrew could act as a modern cultural medium. With this proof went a carefully argued ideology that saw Hebrew as a secular national tongue, “secular” not in the sense of an essentially scriptural medium that also happens to be integrated into national life, but of a medium by which Jews could develop the full spectrum of national secular culture, as an ultimate alternative to the traditional culture. The Berlin Maskilim were conscious of the cultural revolution which they sought to bring on and in which Hebrew figured so prominently. Their historical role is to be found not just in what they did to Hebrew but also in the sense of value and mission they gave it.

The Berlin Haskalah also created the first “modern” Hebrew readership, and their activity transformed the language into a school subject. The study and knowledge of Hebrew were propagated through anthologies and children’s literature. In other words, the three impossible functions that they assigned to Hebrew in Germany continued to operate in various parts of the Jewish world, although the following generations in Germany found that the three could not operate as an integrated whole—and so too in Eastern Europe, as the nineteenth century wore on. It took further historical developments in Jewish society in the “East” for it to become a possibility there.

In the generations to come, Hebrew would again be called upon to play two roles. The first role: “modernizer” of the Jew and vehicle of his interaction with European culture and ingestion of its values. The second role: a national language, the language of new, original literary works. These two roles, far from being complementary, contradicted each other or went their own separate ways, but as the end of the nineteenth century approached they were fulfilling this dual role for a growing swathe of society. What made this possible was that, unlike Germany or its spheres of influence, general Eastern European society was bilingual or even multilingual. This dual role was emphasized in ideology and rhetoric: Hebrew (rather than a foreign language) was viewed as the main bridge from “piety and ignorance” to modern European civilization and—at one and the same time—as the cherished national tongue, “the remnant of our treasures of Antiquity,” i.e., as a cultural tongue in the “classical” and “modern” sense. In Eastern Europe, too, Hebrew was called upon to play the dual role of national-classical language and living artery of modern civilization. Objectively speaking, the Maskilim in the East were in an easier position than those in Germany: for the former, German could not be the natural “language of culture,” and Polish and Russian did not strike them as being on a par. So Yiddish was left to provide the main and only opposition. And indeed, the position of Hebrew vis-à-vis Yiddish on the one hand and Russian on the other was to be a bone of contention from the 1860s on between the “radical Maskilim” working for russification and the “national Maskilim,” and a source of inner doubts

and cultural duality.⁴⁹ In any event, Hebrew in the West could not be the medium of Enlightenment nor a national secular tongue; in the East, it was both of these, and at the same time the language of religious life.

Notes

We begin in 1783 as the year in which the *Hevrat Dorshei Leshon Ever* (Society of Friends of Hebrew) joined forces with Moses Mendelssohn. The year 1819 saw the foundation of the group *Verein für Cultur and Wissenschaft der Juden* and the start of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* school. The “generation of the Me’assefim” extends (with intermissions) across the years 1797–1811. In 1811 the last of *Ha-Me’assef He-Hadash* ceased to appear.

1. Wessely 1782: 1,7. Diglossia for him had to involve Hebrew and German. In this, Wessely followed the philosophy of Mendelssohn; see Eliav 1960:25–51. Another reason for Wessely’s opposition to the use of Hebrew as an “everyday language” was his fear that a wider Jewish public might thereby come under the influence of the “alien wisdoms”; German, by contrast, could only be the possession of a minority of Jews.

2. See Even-Zohar 1970, 1971, 1986; and Wexler 1971.

3. See Raisin 1913, who writes that the editors of *Ha-Ma’assef* held as their guiding idea that “Hebrew was to be utilized as a means of introducing Western civilization. Afterwards it was to be relegated once more to the Holy Ark.” See too the detailed discussion by Tsamiryon 1988: 72–106. The controversy surrounding the “true” intentions of the Maskilim does not always distinguish the various functions knowingly assigned to the two languages. There is also an underlying assumption that the rebirth of Hebrew as a national tongue and acculturation are intrinsically opposites. In the words of Pelli 1979:82, “. . . the Maskilim did not see any dichotomy in their attitude toward the two languages. To them, the two went hand in hand.” However, “nationhood” in the world view of the Maskilim was of a “restricted” kind, seeking primarily to create new layers of awareness not as a shield against acculturation but rather as an accessory and aid to it.

4. See Dinur 1972: 250–52; and also Barzilay 1956 and 1959.

5. “Divrei Shalom ve-Emet,” *Ha-Maggid* (7 April and 15 April 1858).

6. In the celebrated words of H. N. Bialik 1930. Bilingual writers such as Bialik, equally at home in two languages, at least as regards reading and speaking, were not averse to preaching this opinion.

7. Smolenskin 1925. Smolenskin regarded Mendelssohn and his circle as having deliberately given legitimation to German as an exclusive cultural medium, thereby paving the way to assimilation.

8. See Cohen 1866. Euchel made this statement around the turn of the century, see Letteris 1784 = 1862: 46. See also Pelli 1979: 90. n. 3 and also Ben-Ze’ev 1808 in his introduction, pp. 17–18.

9. I. M. Jost in a letter to Ehrenberg roughly a year before the appearance of the Hebrew periodical *Zion* under his editorship in 1840 (see Michael 1983: 139). In the foreword to the first issue of *Zion* Jost wrote to “a friend living in Poland” that the periodical was intended for the knowledge-thirsty Jewish reader not versed in German or any other European language. See Eliav 1960: 162–76.

10. See in this regard the two comprehensive articles by Harshav 1990 and Morag 1990; as well as Rabin 1980.

11. See the controversy between Yehudah Friedlander 1987 and Me'ir Gilon 1987. Gilon is right to stress that rabbis and Haskalah writers did not share the same aim when writing of the need to study Hebrew. Mendelssohn's *Bi'ur* evoked sympathetic responses by rabbis—along with trenchant and unbridled criticism—because they regarded it as a fitting and reliable substitute for the Latin translation rather than as a rival to the Hebrew. Mendelssohn himself, incidentally, did not intend the *Bi'ur* to be a Jew's "teach-yourself German"; see Greenberg 1983: 113–20. On the rabbinic opposition to the *Bi'ur* see Eliav 1960: 30–36. The Maskilim, be it noted, saw Hebrew not only as a means of understanding the prayer book or as a layer in everyday life but as a classic vehicle of "modernization."

12. In its first year *Ha-Me'assef* had just eight subscribers in Poland and Lithuania, a number that would increase as the years passed. *Ha-Me'assef he-Hadash* already boasted many more subscribers outside Germany, three hundred apparently. See Tsamriyon 1988: 47. However, this says less about Hebrew literacy than about the size of the readership that considered Hebrew the vehicle of Haskalah ideas and the channel of communication of the new social set. On *Ha-Me'assef*, see also Röhl (1985).

13. Meyer 1988: 24–25.

14. Katz 1973: 65. Katz highlights the fact that those behind *Ha-Me'assef* changed their name in 1785 from *Dorshai Sefat Ever* (Friends of Hebrew) to *Die Gesellschaft zur Beförderung des Guten und Edlen*, signifying the rapid and radical ideological shift in their world view.

15. Strictly speaking, the nexus between these two facts is far from automatic. Modern Jewish education at that time was also producing new Hebrew users, alongside those who were there at the birth of *Ha-Me'assef* thanks to their traditional schooling. It is patently impossible, however, that the knowledge of the two languages could evolve in parallel fashion.

16. Euchel 1832. On Euchel, see Feiner 1987 and Pelli 1979: 190–230.

17. On the attitude of the Maskilim to Yiddish, see Tsamriyon 1988: 87–88, and Shemueli 1986.

18. It will be recalled that Wessely in *Nahal Absor* (i.e., *Nahal Ha-Besor*), ed. Letteris: p. 8, designated German for "worldly affairs of business" and for "general learning" unrelated to Torah. Thus linguistic stratification was also to reflect social stratification, expressing, to my mind, a "conservative" social standpoint that distinguished elite from masses in the new socio-cultural context.

19. The compliments paid to Hebrew allude—and even refer directly—to Aggadic Midrashim extolling Hebrew as well as to statements to this effect by Maimonides, Yehudah Halevi, Rashi, and others. See Tsamriyon 1988: 72–106 and n. 67. On Maimonides' viewpoint on the special nature of Hebrew and his attitude to the "confusion of tongues" resulting from the Exile, see Twersky 1989 and Levinger 1989: 94–98. Maimonides held that the purity of Hebrew had been sullied by life in exile and could only be restored by resettling the Holy Land (and thus no Maskil could be "national" by this philosophy!). He was, however, not party to the fundamental criticism of mishnaic Hebrew. A mordantly negative stand against Hebrew polyglossia was taken by Joseph Kimhi, of a classically purist persuasion. A different view was voiced by Jonah Ibn Janah and others who espoused the cause of comparative philology—see Talmage 1989. For views on the origin of language—conventional or natural—see Wolfson 1950: 609–22. The Maskilim concurred that language possesses a "pure (classical) state" which must be regained, in line with the view of contemporary German literati who sought to return German to its "*rein Deutsch*" or "*rechte deutsche Sprache*" state.

20. "Our entire purpose is to raise the horn of Judea that languishes in the ashes of oblivion and in the dunghoops of disgrace." *Ha-Me'assef* (1774): 192 *et passim*. Here too there is

an overlap with the widely-held belief that the state of a language is an embodiment of the general cultural state of a nation. See also Gilon 1979.

21. Altman 1973: 88 states that "Mendelssohn wished to show that biblical Hebrew was capable of expressing all moods of human life—sorrow, joy, anger etc. In other words, classical Hebrew could serve as an organ of expression even in modern times."

22. For full details of such declarations, see Yitzhaki 1970, Pelli 1979, and Tsamriyon 1988.

23. See Pelli 1988: 18–22.

24. On the "discovery of tongues," see Pederson 1962 and Guxman 1977.

25. Blackall 1959: 1.

26. See Katz 1982: 43–87. For brief discussion of Hebraism in Germany, see the section "Hebräisch und Bibelstudien," in Harifinger 1989: 306–35.

27. On Georg Hamann (1730–88), see Blackall 1959: 430–37. Hamann was of course a fierce critic of Mendelssohn and regarded language as a manifestation of revelation, cf. the dispute there between the rationalist and mystical approach to the character of biblical language. The Rationalists denied its "clarity" (which they considered the prime quality of language), whereas Hamann rejected the use of clarity as an absolute criterion of style.

28. Lowth 1969. See the introduction by Vincent Freimarck, v–xxxvi. For Lowth's influence on Shelomo Levisohn, see Tova Cohen 1988: 32–33.

29. Blackwell 1976. On the book's powerful influence upon the German Aufklärung, see Reil 1975: 203–204.

30. See Gilon 1979: 55–74. *Kohelet Mussar* (1755–56), like the contemporaneous German journals and literary periodicals (*moralische Wochenschriften*, "moral weeklies"), aimed to foster and propagate a correct style. See Van Dülmen 1986 and Blackall 1959: 49–101.

31. Cohen 1988: 49–55, is at pains to emphasize the influence of the English pre-Romantic poetics of the sublime, and of course Levisohn's direct acquaintance with the *Peri Hypsophy* of Longinus in its Latin translation. On the other hand, she allows no room for the contemporaneous poetics and philosophy of language of the German Enlightenment.

32. Twersky 1989.

33. Blackwell 1976: 36, 46–47.

34. Irmacher 1985: 137–73. Herder held that "every language has its own genius," and this is a source of inspiration for views like Bialik's (cf. note 6) and the nationalist-Romantic concept of the Hebrew language in modern times.

35. On the influence of this outlook on the tie between language, culture, and society in the U.S.A., see Bynack 1984: "To establish a national standard." Social and national cultural reform were seen as bound up with correctness and purity of language.

36. Tsamriyon 1988: 78–84.

37. I discuss this matter in my book (in press), *Judaism in the Greek Mirror*.

38. Lowth (p. 39) stated that compared to the Hebrew, Greek "beyond every other language (and Latin next to it) is a copious flowing, and harmonious, possessed of a great variety of measures, of which the impression definite, the affects so striking. . . ."

39. See, for example, Shavit 1987.

40. German was more highly esteemed than other European languages as a language of culture by the Maskilim and Jewish intelligentsia in particular throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. French, by contrast, represented a "decadent culture."

41. Mendele Mokher Sefarim in his story *Ha-Avot ve-ha-Banim* (reprinted 1963): 14–15, writes that Hebrew was the beginning of the Haskalah: "for among them too, the desire for knowledge and intellect only begins to stir through the Hebrew language. It opens their eyes and gives them the basics."

42. Ahad Ha'am 1930.

43. On the place of Hebrew in the Jewish school curriculum in Germany, see the detailed description by Eliav 1960. In the school in Wolfenbüttel (p. 108), for instance, in 1818 the first two classes had 5 hours of Hebrew, 5 of German, 4 of French, 4 of Latin, and 2 of Greek. In 1843 they were taking 9 hours of German and 4 of Hebrew; the other languages had gone.

44. The first Hebrew textbooks in the natural sciences appeared in the mid-eighteenth century. On the Hebrew literature for younger readers, see Zohar Shavit 1987.

45. Breuer 1986: 83. Geiger 1861 wrote in similar vein of language being a creation of the spirit and emotions and thus the fact that Hebrew was no longer a living tongue or even a language of enlightenment or religious expression created alienation. Hence the desirability that prayer too (even in private) should be in German.

46. Jahn 1810.

47. Michaelis 1769: 12. Note that this is a matter of the national language of the *Kultur-nation*, not of a politically united nation.

48. See Tsamriyon 1988 and others.

49. See Breiman 1954.

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